

Fire Department Overtime/Staffing Options

July 31, 2006

By

James Martins, Fire Chief

Background

Your City of Franklin Fire Department operates a full service fire department including fire suppression, hazardous materials response, confined space, Basic Life Support (BLS) and Advanced Life Support (ALS) also referred to as paramedics and many other services to the citizens of Franklin. It operates out of three fire stations with a goal of providing ambulance response in five minutes 90% of the time and fire response in six minutes 90% of the time. In order to accomplish this goal, a minimum of ten Emergency Medical Service (EMS) firefighters work out of three fire stations located throughout the city. These personnel are dual trained which means they do what ever is needed based on the request. If an ambulance call comes in, the personnel respond on an ambulance. If a fire call comes in, the same personnel leave the ambulance behind and respond on a fire truck. Ten personnel on duty each day equates to the minimum number needed to staff three BLS ambulances (two personnel each) and one paramedic unit (three personnel) with the final person assigned to the command car which responds to all incidents and is operated by the shift commander.

If the staffing drops below ten, one unit would have to be taken out of service and the citizens who live in the area protected by that unit would not receive the same level of care other citizens do or the paramedic unit staffing would be reduced. In order to maintain ten personnel on duty each day, the only option the management team has is to cover with staff as much as possible and pay overtime. The result has been a continued overrun of the overtime budget. The following shows the budgeted overtime for the past three years compared to the actual usage:

Year	Adopted Budgeted	Actual
2003	\$102,324	\$152,712
2004	\$120,000	\$180,970
2005	\$108,000	\$269,530

The main reasons for this are unexpected injuries or illnesses as well as the Family Leave Act. Although each shift is required to spread out holiday and vacation time to ensure that a minimum of ten personnel are scheduled each day, the before mentioned items result in the staffing dropping below ten and overtime is expended to maintain ten.

In 2005 the fire department responded to 2,965 runs. This is 300 more runs than in 2001 (the last time there was an increase in staffing). As of July 17, 2006, the fire department has responded to 124 more runs than on this date in 2005. This increase is due to the growth of the community and has occurred in spite of the fact that the House of Corrections has employed 24 hour nursing care reducing the fire department responses from 300 in 2002 to an estimated 50 in 2006. This increase in activity is directly correlated to an increase in response times. An average of the first four months of 2006 shows only 78% of the time that ambulances were able to respond in five minutes or less and 74% of the time for fire response under six minutes.

The following options should be considered to not only increase staffing in order to keep up with growth, but to provide the flexibility needed by the management team of the fire department to control overtime.

Option One, Increase Staffing Full-Time

The first option to be considered is to hire three EMT/firefighters full-time. This will allow the fire department to improve staffing levels on the east side allowing for the implementation of a second paramedic unit while improving the firefighting capability as well. It will also provide the flexibility needed by management to alter staffing levels to remain within the overtime budget.

Under this option, the additional three full-time employees will be assigned to a 24 hour shift, one on each of the three shifts. This equates to 14 personnel assigned to each of the three shifts. Allowing a maximum of three personnel scheduled off each day, this will allow your fire department to schedule 11 EMS/firefighters each day. The fire department will attempt to stay at 11 personnel on duty as often as possible by only allowing three personnel off on scheduled leave each day. In order to stay within the budget, the department will drop to 10 employees per day as a minimum. However, most days your fire department will be staffed at 11 with two paramedic units and two basic ambulance crews, all of which are capable of fire fighting.

Increasing to 11 per day most of the time will help to keep up with the increasing call volume while providing the citizens of Franklin an enhancement in paramedic and firefighting care. On the days when the fire department can staff to 11, a second fully staffed paramedic unit will be able to provide advanced life support to the most critically ill or injured patients on the east side of the city including the new and rapidly developing 27th street corridor on average, four to five minutes quicker than today. Having the second paramedic unit available will also provide a faster paramedic response when the

first paramedic unit is tied up on another call instead of having to wait for a paramedic unit from another community. This option will significantly improve paramedic coverage and care to the citizens of Franklin while helping to meet the fire department's goal to provide quality care within five minutes, 90% of the time. It will improve the response times because units will not have to go to another stations' area to help as often leaving them more spread throughout the city because enough help will be on scene. The additional costs associated with this option are shown in Appendix-A.

The benefit to hiring full-time is that there would be very little added administrative duties once the employees become familiar with the job and turnover would be limited. There would not be any labor issues and the quality that comes from longevity would be realized by the citizens of Franklin. The disadvantage to this is the cost. Full-time employees require step increases as well as health insurance and retiree health benefits.

Under this option an alternative can be considered to help ease the financial burden. Hiring one full-time employee per year will gradually address the staffing concerns while allowing management to assign this employee to the shift in need. For example, this year the employee would have been assigned to Lt. Robertson's shift. However, once this issue is addressed, the employee would be assigned to the shift from which the next paramedic student is assigned (paramedic students leave to go to school for about four months leaving a void on shift requiring overtime to fill the vacancy). When the department is operating at full staff, the employee will allow for the implementation of a second med unit and the other benefits mentioned above.

In summary, this option will result in an improved paramedic and firefighting services while reducing paramedic response times to the citizens of Franklin. It will also

help to address the growing run volume while providing the management team with the flexibility needed to manage overtime costs as well. It is also well under comparable fire department budgets and the estimated amount needed is less than the Mayor set aside to assist with the staffing of the fire department in the last budget. This option will provide the Franklin Fire Department with the staffing needed to not only improve service but to operate within budget.

Option Two, Increase Staffing, Part-Time

The second option to increase staffing and service is to hire six part-time employees. Under this option two part-time employees would be hired for each full-time person mentioned in option one. Two part-time personnel would be assigned to each of the three shifts increasing each shift by one Full Time Equivalent (FTE) to 14 FTE assigned each day only allowing three scheduled off making the scheduled minimum each day 11.

As is the case in option one, increasing to 11 per day most of the time will help to keep up with the increasing call volume while providing the citizens of Franklin an enhancement in paramedic and firefighting care. On the days when the fire department can staff to 11, a second fully staffed paramedic unit will be able to provide advanced life support to the most critically ill or injured patients on the east side of the city including the new and rapidly developing 27th street corridor on average, four to five minutes quicker than today. Having the second paramedic unit available will also provide a faster paramedic response when the first paramedic unit is tied up on another call instead of having to wait for a paramedic unit from another community. This option will significantly improve paramedic coverage and care to the citizens of Franklin while

helping to meet the fire department's goal to provide quality care within five minutes, 90% of the time. It will improve the response times because units will not have to go to another stations' area to help as often leaving them more spread throughout the city because enough help will be on scene. The additional costs associated with this option are shown in Appendix-B.

Advantages to hiring part-time employees are cost savings, the ability to see the part-time employee's work habits prior to hiring them full-time, and although turnover is a negative, the influx of new employees requires training, ensuring the full-time employees revisit basic skills training. Disadvantages are the turnover associated with part-time. As an example, Pleasant Prairie Fire Department employs part-time employees. Assistant Chief McElmury of Pleasant Prairie stated he rarely has a part-time employee stay more than three years. Recently he had two employees make it through the department hiring process and training program only to work a total of three shifts between the two of them and leave for other jobs. The added administrative duties dealing with new employees and the labor conflicts generated by having two different labor groups performing the same job are also disadvantages. Employee dedication and accountability must also be considered.

Option Three, Increase Overtime

As seen over the past several years, the overtime budget has not met the demands of the city. The third option to help the fire department with staffing and to stay within budget is to increase the overtime budget.

As mentioned earlier, long term injuries, illnesses and Family Leave Act obligations make staffing ten EMS/Firefighters each day very difficult under the current

overtime budget. The overtime budget has been the source of many discussions at the finance committee as well as at budget time at the council level. Over the past two years, the decision has been made to put the money in contingency instead of the overtime budget with the understanding that the budgeted overtime is not adequate for the department's needs but money would be allocated from contingency if or when needed.

If the first or second option is not implemented, the third option is to budget an amount of money into the fire department's overtime budget based on actual history and consistent with the Chiefs request. One might argue that it is circular logic to say "because it has been spent in the past, we must budget for it now". However, as stated earlier, the decision was made not to budget what the fire department requested but to put the money into contingency and deal with the overtime as it happens. The resulting overrun of the overtime budget gives the appearance that the management team of the fire department is unable to manage a budget to those who do not recall or were not involved in the budget process.

Over the past two years, the fire department has had at least one individual out on injury or illness the entire time. This has a significant impact on the overtime budget. This year is a perfect example. Lt. Robertson has been out on injury since May of 2005. The fire department requested \$180,000 in overtime assuming this issue would be handled and a replacement hired by May. There remains no end in sight thus maintaining the minimum staffing is causing the overtime budget to be projected above the department request. Because the staffing levels leave little room for injury or illness, overtime estimation at budget time is at best a guess. An increase of \$100,000 making the overtime budget \$250,000 is a number that the fire department would consider

adequate and could manage without overrun. If there are no injuries or illnesses, this number would be less.

Advantages to this option are that no additional administrative work would be required and existing employees who are well trained and experienced will be used to ensure staffing levels are met. This option would also avoid any labor issues with differing levels of employment. Disadvantages to this option are that there will not be many days when an eleventh person would be on duty thus no improvement in quality of service or paramedic response would be realized by citizens. Nothing would be done to address the slipping response times. This option would also lead to employees putting in too many hours and burn out may occur.

In summary, budgeting \$250,000 into the fire department overtime budget would allow the fire department to maintain the ten minimum needed to provide the level of service provided today. This option would not create any additional administrative work nor would it create any labor issues. However, the citizens would not realize any additional benefits and there are risks associated with burn out because the employees would be working many more hours than normal.

Summary

In response to concerns over the fire department budget, the fire department was asked to come up with options to address the overtime concerns. With the exception of a minimal amount of staff meetings, the only things the overtime budget is used for are mandatory training requirements, scheduled minimum staffing, and calling in off duty people when calls drop the available staffing below five people. The three options to consider are to increase the scheduled staffing with three full-time employees, six part-

time, or to increase the overtime budget to meet the demand. Of these options, the fire department recommends option one, increasing the staffing using full-time possibly phasing in the hiring to reduce budget impact. As Chief I am aware that increasing staffing of the fire department is costly. However, protecting the citizens of Franklin must be government's number one responsibility.

Respectfully,

James Martins, Fire Chief